

PUGET SOUND FLOURING MILLS

(Sperry Flour Company)

(Sperry Ocean Dock)

611 Schuster Parkway, 1 mile northwest of downtown Tacoma
on Commencement Bay

Tacoma

Pierce County

Washington

HAER No. WA-27

HAER
WASH,
27-TACO,
7-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
Western Regional Office
National Park Service
U. S. Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94102

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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Location: 611 Schuster Parkway, 1 mile northwest of downtown
Tacoma on Commencement Bay
Tacoma, Pierce County, Washington

UTM: 52.35485.541251
Quad: Tacoma North

Date of Construction: 1889-1890

Developer: William S. Ladd, Portland, Oregon

Present Owner: Sperry Ocean Dock, Ltd.
2115 North 30th Street, Suite 202
Tacoma, Washington 98403
Attention: Gary Coy
(206) 272-7337

Present Use: Buildings are vacant; dock used for deep water mooring
of military reserve fleet ships. Buildings to be
demolished in 1990.

Significance: The Sperry Flour Company warehouses are the oldest
remaining structures of the original Puget Sound Flouring
Mills opened by William S. Ladd, one of Portland's most
prominent 19th century industrialists, in 1889 and sold
to the Sperry Flour Company in 1922. The Building
represents the first of the waterfront mills which was
part of a continuous industrial complex along
Commencement Bay from City Waterway to Point Defiance.
The structure represents 70 years of milling and grain
transport operations which ended in the early 1960s.

Report Prepared By: Jeffrey D. Mann
Director of Planning
PAC-TECH Engineering, Inc.
6100 Southcenter Boulevard, Suite 100
Seattle, Washington 98188

Date: March 1990

PUGET SOUND FLOURING MILLS WAREHOUSE

Description

The Puget Sound Flouring Mills warehouse, also known as the Sperry Flour Company warehouse or Sperry Ocean Dock, is a large overwater structure originally used for flour warehousing and loading during 70 years of Tacoma's shoreline flour milling history. It was built on pilings that support both the building platform and the dock structure. The site also includes approximately 20,000 square feet of upland area. The site is commonly referred to as the Sperry Ocean Dock, as the warehouse and dock were purchased by the Sperry Flour Company from the Puget Sound Flouring Mills. The purpose of this report and photographs are to document the warehouse structure, although the historical discussion in this report will relate to the use of the entire shoreline area, including the dock and warehouse.

History

The Puget Sound Flouring Mills warehouse, is the remaining structure of a once-thriving flour milling operation on Tacoma's waterfront. The operation was one of three flour mill operations located in the vicinity in the early 1900s. The milling operation made up just one portion of the extensive commercial and industrial operations that existed along the waterfront from the mid-1800s to the mid-1960s.

Much has been written with regard to the development of Tacoma's waterfront. The flour mill operations developed in concert with Tacoma's shoreline commercial area. Tacoma's earliest commercial area extended along the shoreline of Commencement Bay from Point Defiance south through today's city waterway. This 4-1/4-mile strip of land, bounded by the bay on the east and a steep bluff on the west, varies in width from 200 to 600 feet. Because of the narrowness of the land, deep water and lashing waves, construction efforts required extensive fill and pilings as support for foundations. Notwithstanding, this area became the focal point of Tacoma's industrial and commercial activity. By 1900, the Tacoma waterfront was an unbroken linear industrial complex representing lumber, bulk building, grain and shipping firms.¹

As early as 1869, Samuel Bowles, exploring the western frontier with Vice President Colfax, described the great potential of the northwest as a region. In his book, Our New West, he recognizes the importance of constructing a transcontinental railroad to develop and utilize the abundant wealth of the western territories. In 1873, the location of the Northern Pacific Trans-Continental Terminus in Tacoma led to the establishment of the city as the foremost port on Puget Sound. The railroad opened the way for wheat grown in eastern Washington to be conveniently transported to Tacoma for processing and shipment. With ocean transport by way of Tacoma's natural deep water harbor, and with rail service to the interior and the eastern states providing an

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interlocking distributive network, the city's commercial potential was at a premium. Opening in 1887, the Tacoma Flouring Mill was Tacoma's first grain-related industry. Although not a waterfront mill, it was the first local business to mill grain from eastern Washington. Previous to the establishment of this mill, the nearest flour firm was Old Byrd's Mill on Steilacoom Creek, 5 miles southwest of the city."²

The Puget Sound Flouring Mill Company's warehouse was part of Tacoma's first waterfront grain operation. The firm first achieved significance as a grain export terminal. Constructed between 1889 and 1890, the dock, warehouse and loading facilities were presided over by William S. Ladd, one of Portland, Oregon's most prominent 19th century industrialist. Construction required extensive excavation of the bluff backing the site. Earth removed from the bluff was used to fill for the dock's foundation. All work was done by hand, with men shoveling the earth into small hand trucks which were rolled on narrow gauge rails to designated dumping points. Laborers worked night and day shifts completing this formidable project in under a year.³

With railroad facilities, ocean transport and local coal deposits with Wilkeson-Carbonado fields of north Pierce County, the Puget Sound firm developed out of a natural transportational matrix. The steamships which formed the mainstay of the Pacific Wheat Fleet relied upon coal to fire their boilers. Of all the Puget Sound ports, only Tacoma could provide the transportation and field crew requisites which made grain export profitable.⁴

During the 1890s, the Trans Pacific ship lines of the Northern Pacific Railroad began hauling wheat to China and Japan. In 1892, the Phra Nang, first of the Northern Pacific's ocean-going steamers, entered Commencement Bay to the greeting of enthusiastic crowds gathering along the waterfront. Filled with grain from the Puget Sound Flouring Mill, the Phra Nang embarked for the Orient on the first of a long series of voyages with the Puget Sound Wheat Fleet. By 1910, two-thirds of Washington's grain products were being exported from Tacoma to the Orient in the form of unprocessed wheat.⁵

The grain industry lent diversely to Tacoma's railroad and lumber oriented economy. By 1910, the city was the largest grain center west of Minneapolis and one of the principle cereal manufacturing points in the United States. The waterfront mills alone produced nearly \$7,000,000 worth of finished products in 1911. The largest grain warehouse and wharf complex in the world stretched from Puget Sound Flouring Mills south to the Tacoma Grain Company. The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 expanded Tacoma's grain trade to include European markets.⁶

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As a forerunner in the industry's modernization, the Puget Sound company was first of the Pacific Coast mills to install electric conveyors for loading cargos of flour onto ships and developing a network of regional warehouses for grain storage. With the opening of the Tacoma Grain Company in 1903, grain processing and exporting became a leading industry in Tacoma, second only to lumber. Under William W. Saymore and Morris Thomsen of Tacoma, the firm located 2,000 feet south of the Puget Sound Flouring Mills, maintained a contemporary plant, complete with a wharf warehouse railroad access and its landmark elevator A.⁷

The inclusion of the Sperry Flour Company in 1906 completed the Waterfront Flouring Mill District. With J. D. Armstrong of Seattle, Washington, as president, the Sperry Mills, between the Puget Sound and Tacoma grain firms, consisted of mill, warehouse, elevator B and export wharfs. Growing quickly, the Sperry Flour Company absorbed the aging Puget Sound Company in 1922, outlasting the Tacoma Grain Company, which closed in 1940. The Sperry Mill remained active under General Mills through the early 1960s. The old mill and elevators, dormant for several years, were demolished in 1973 to make room for Schuster Parkway.⁸

The Sperry Flour Company warehouses were part of an extensive flour milling operation, which consisted of three companies, the Puget Sound Flouring Mills Company, the Sperry Flour Mills, and the Tacoma Grain Company. As shown in the Historical Site Plan for the Milling District (see Figure 1), these operations covered approximately 3,000 feet of waterfront along Commencement Bay. In 1922, the Sperry Flour Company purchased the mill and warehouses that belonged to the Puget Sound Flouring Mills Company. It is these warehouses that became the Sperry Flour Company warehouse and what is known today as the Sperry Ocean Dock.

Today, the warehouse and dock are the only recognizable structures of the entire flouring complex. Some piling and remnants of docking structures exist along the shoreline to the east of the site. A remnant of an asphalt concrete road and rail line that connected the Sperry Flour Company elevator B with the original Puget Sound flouring mill and grain elevator is found along the city-owned Bayside Trail, which winds along the bluff to the south of Schuster Parkway.

The Sperry Ocean Dock - Historical Use

The Sperry Ocean Dock facility was originally constructed between 1889-1890 and was utilized in the intervening years as a grain holding, processing and loading facility. Grain was brought to the facility by trains and then processed and loaded onto ships from the water side of the existing building. Figure 1 depicts the site plan of the mill operation as well as other mill and cargo loading operations along the shoreline in the vicinity of the Sperry Ocean Dock. The building was closed from these operations by General Mills and sold to Drury Petrich, Inc. in 1968. During the time of this ownership, the rail, building

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and dock were used for general cargo, including the storage of smelted copper. Ships as large as the Ticonderoga berthed at the Sperry Ocean Dock site, while awaiting its next assignment.⁹

In 1977, the firm of Owen-Miller purchased the Sperry Ocean Dock and for two years continued with the same uses. In June of 1979, Mr. Cullop purchased the facility with the intent of converting it into a marina. The total conversion never took place, and the marina closed in 1981. Commercial fish packers and barges used the dock. The building went back to general storage in order to generate some revenue until it was sold. In late 1981, the property was put up for sale, marketed across the United States, on the Atlantic, Pacific and Gulf coasts, as well as extensively overseas.¹⁰

In June of 1986, Sperry Ocean Dock, Ltd., a Washington State corporation, acquired the property. Sperry Ocean Dock, Ltd., along with TLM Berthing, acquired the necessary permits to rehabilitate and substantially upgrade the existing mooring facilities.¹¹

The Sperry Ocean Dock Warehouse Building

The following are excerpts of an untitled, unpublished document on the Sperry Ocean Dock.¹²

"The Sperry Ocean Dock warehouse is the only remaining building of the Puget Sound Flouring Mill Complex. Constructed in 1889, the warehouse stretches over 200 yards along the shoreline of Commencement Bay, just east of Old Town near the foot of Starr Street. The building was constructed on fill and supported above the tide line by pilings and wood piers on the portion of the bay which was developed as Tacoma's earliest port facility."

"The warehouse is a wood building framed with heavy timbers on a dock of fir planks. It is a multi-level structure which encompasses 120,000 square feet on the main floor with an additional 40,000 square feet spread among several upper levels. An exposed beam ceiling of particularly heavy timbers suggests an early effort to minimize fire danger. Sprinklers added throughout the warehouse during the late 1950s provide further security to a building which becomes more vulnerable with age."

"The roof line is made up of four gables on a second-story level and an additional gabled tower. The remainder of the building is set to the south of the fourth second-story gable and consists of 11 one-story gables in succession. Running almost the entire length of the west side of the building is a 5-foot overhang covering 19 sliding wood doors which facilitate the loading and unloading of railway cars that run on several sets of tracks the length of the warehouse. Windows are spaced irregularly near the roof line."

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"Reference to early photographs indicate that the warehouse has undergone visible alterations. The gabled tower was apparently not included in the original building, but added shortly before the turn of the century. Dock improvements in 1949 included replacement of the original wood pilings with cement. The dock was widened from 18 to 24 feet and four grain chutes were added, running from the warehouse to the lip of the dock. Wood pilings were reinstalled during the mid 1960s, due to tidal erosion of their cement counterparts."

The dock and platform are approximately 760 feet in length and range from 120-240 feet in width. Virtually, the entire platform is over water. Only the southern edge of the platform, adjacent to the railroad tracks, is on upland. The platform and dock are supported by up to 24 rows of wooden pilings, spaced at 10-foot intervals. The warehouse structure covers almost the entire surface of the dock except for the loading and docking area on the waterward side of the building, which extends 75 feet beyond the platform and is approximately 370 feet in length. The dock is currently equipped with resting and mooring dolphins that secure two vessels which are berthed at the site.

Physical Characteristics of the Sperry Ocean Dock Property

The following are excerpts from the Environmental Impact Statement for the Sperry Ocean Dock Shoreline Permit.¹³

"The Sperry Ocean Dock site has a number of unique features which allowed its use as a grain distribution center. The most significant feature is the existing deep water along this portion of Commencement Bay. At medium-low or low water, this area has approximately 25 feet of depth 30 feet from the shore and approximately 50 feet of depth at a distance of 60 feet from shore. This characteristic, which is a limited resource, is found in the Commencement Bay and Tacoma Tidelands area and is a critical natural resource which has been, in the past, and will be, in the future, utilized for maritime industrial uses, as proposed by the city's shoreline policy."

"Another unique characteristic of the Sperry Ocean Dock site is that it consists of only 22,000 square feet of upland area. This upland area is located in the parking area on the western portion of the site. The remainder of the site, the Sperry Ocean Dock building, is built entirely on pilings over water and the land that it owns above the ordinary high water mark along the shoreline. This physical characteristic of the site limits the potential use of the proposed Sperry Ocean Dock due to limited upland area to provide for large amounts of parking that would be required for such activities as a park, entertainment, retail or commercial activities."

"The Sperry Ocean Dock is separated from the existing residential neighborhood to the south by the Burlington North Railroad, Schuster Parkway, and the sharp topographical rise south of the site. The Burlington Northern Railroad right-of-way includes two mainline north/south tracks and a third set of tracks for uni-train storage associated with the Continental Grain Company. Schuster Parkway is a four-lane major arterial with a median strip. The bluff rises 80 to 145 feet above the site to existing homes located to the south. These features result in there being a 300-foot to 400-foot horizontal separation and an 80-foot to 145-foot vertical separation between the elevation of the Sperry Ocean Dock site and the existing neighborhood to the south."

"Access to the Sperry Ocean Dock is from a 22-foot, leased road developed in 1985 by moving one-third of a mile of Burlington Northern Railroad tracks. This extends from an existing access road from Schuster Parkway to the Commencement Park parking area."

Existing Setting

The proposed Sperry Ocean Dock is located in the North Slope area of the city of Tacoma. This area encompasses the waterfront where the project is located, an industrial marine terminal to the east, existing neighborhoods on the south, Old Town and Ruston Way to the west, Commencement Park and the industrial buildings and an existing vessel berthing operation to the immediate west.

East:

To the east of the dock is shoreline leading to the Continental Grainery Terminal. Most of the shoreline area is taken up with Burlington Northern Railroad tracks leading to the grainery. Along the shoreline are remnants of docks and other mooring facilities.

South:

To the south, separated from the waterfront area by the railroad, Schuster Parkway and bluff, is the Stadium/Seminary neighborhood. Immediately to the west of the neighborhoods is the Garfield Gulch and surrounding residential area. These neighborhoods are comprised of early Tacoma residential area marked by a mixture of residential styles. A portion of this area has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places as the Stadium-Seminary Historic District.

West:

To the west of the dock is the former Tacoma Boat Industrial Building. Further west is the city's Commencement Park which is the easterly terminus

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of the Ruston Way shoreline waterway and park system. Also to the west of the site is the Old Town Tacoma.

North:

To the north is Commencement Bay.

Sperry Ocean Dock Today:

The Sperry Ocean Dock warehouse has deteriorated significantly in the last several years. Several sections of the 11 single-gabled sections of the building have collapsed. Several other portions of the building are in danger of collapse. Only significant repairs have prevented the collapse of the building.

While awaiting the securing of shoreline permits for its demolition, the city of Tacoma has designated it as a dangerous building and have been working with the Sperry Ocean Dock Company to secure its demolition. The warehouse is to be demolished in 1990.

This document is accompanied by photographs showing its current condition and historical photographs of the warehouse in the early 1960s and 1970s.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Untitled document, pages 3, 4, and 5 (hereafter Untitled).
- ² Tacoma's Waterfront Development, pages 22-24 (hereafter Tacoma's Waterfront).
- ³ Untitled, pages 3-4.
- ⁴ Ibid, page 4.
- ⁵ Ibid, page 4.
- ⁶ Ibid, page 24.
- ⁷ Tacoma's Waterfront, page 23.
- ⁸ Tacoma's Waterfront, page 24.
- ⁹ Sperry Ocean Dock, Draft Environmental Impact Statement, City of Tacoma, June 1988.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Untitled document containing a description of the Sperry Ocean Dock Warehouse and its significance in shoreline development, pages 1 and 2.
- ¹³ Sperry Ocean Dock, Draft Environmental Impact Statement, City of Tacoma, June 1988.

SECTION 32 T.21N. R.3E.

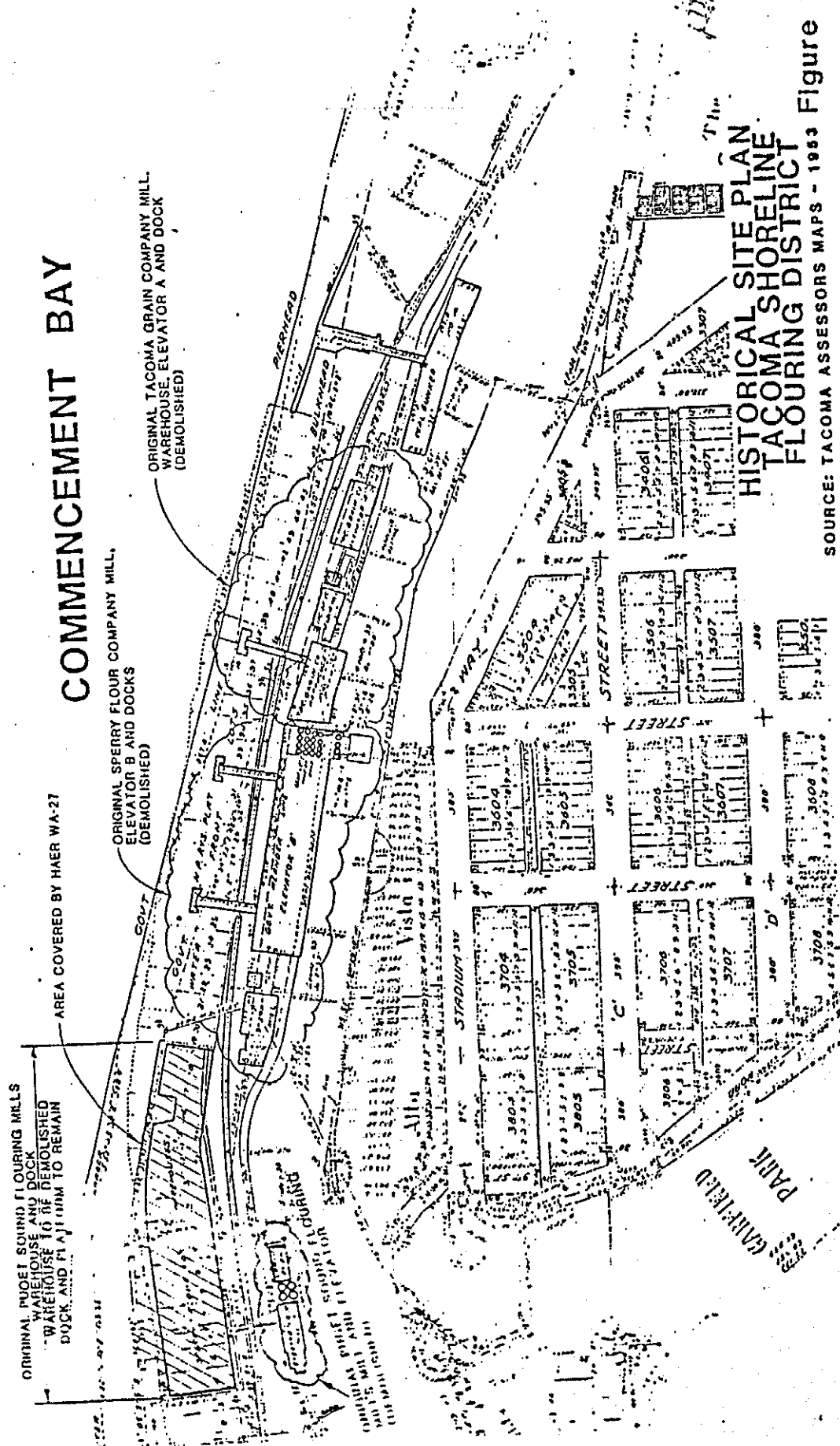
ORIGINAL PUGET SOUND FLOURING MILLS
WAREHOUSE AND DOCK
TO BE DEMOLISHED
DOCK AND FLAT TO REMAIN

AREA COVERED BY HAER WA-27

COMMENCEMENT BAY

ORIGINAL SPERRY FLOUR COMPANY MILL,
ELEVATOR B AND DOCKS
(DEMOLISHED)

ORIGINAL TACOMA GRAIN COMPANY MILL,
WAREHOUSE, ELEVATOR A AND DOCK
(DEMOLISHED)



HISTORICAL SITE PLAN
TACOMA SHORELINE
FLOURING DISTRICT

SOURCE: TACOMA ASSESSORS MAPS - 1953 Figure 1

